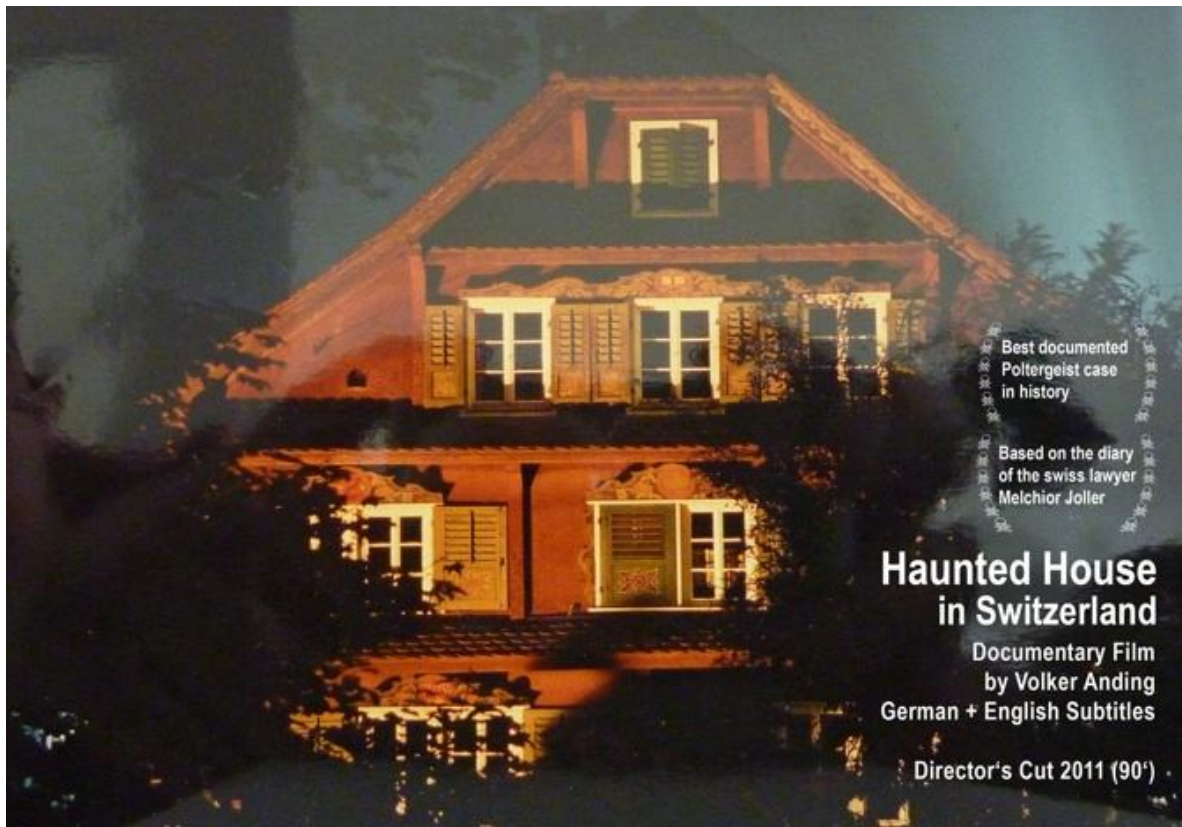


Melchior Joller and the Stans Poltergeist

by

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An essay review of *Haunted House in Switzerland*, a documentary film by Volker Anding. Ninety minutes, German with English subtitles. First released as *Das Spukhaus*, 2003, rereleased in revised form in 2011. See www.volkeranding.de for details.



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I

Before discussing Volker Anding's fascinating documentary, it is worth sketching in the details of this sorry tale. Melchior Joller (1818 – 1865) was at the epicentre of one of the most fascinating poltergeist cases in history. He lived in Stans, provincial capital of the half-canton of Nidwalden, near Lake Lucerne in German-speaking Switzerland. There he occupied a substantial house with his wife Karoline (née Wenz, 1820-1904), whom he married in November 1842, and their seven children: sons Robert (b. December 1843), Eduard (b. October 1851), Oskar (b. February 1853) and Alfred (b. November 1858); and daughters, Emaline (b. October 1845), Melanie (b. May 1848) and Henrika or Henricke (b. March 1850), plus a servant.

Joller, who had been born and raised in the house, and had owned it since his father's death in 1845, was a prominent local citizen. He was a lawyer and an ambitious liberal politician, though not a particularly successful one: he had served a single three-year term as a backbencher in the National Suisse (the Swiss National Council), from 1857, and although he stood for offices in Nidwalden, he was never elected. He had co-founded a liberal newspaper, *Nidwaldner Wochenblatt* (*Nidwaldner Weekly*), which ran into problems with the Catholic clergy, and he was opposed to the death penalty. He had farming and forestry interests in the area through his family estate.

He was a solid bourgeois, seemingly well-regarded by his fellow citizens, even though his views would have been likely to make him political enemies. On the whole, life for the family appeared to be very comfortable, but disaster was to befall them. Fortunately (for us), Joller kept a diary which thoroughly documented their experiences, and he published a version in September 1863, entitled *Darstellung selbsterlebter mystischer Erscheinungen* (*Narrative of Personally Experienced Strange Phenomena*). This is our primary source for the case, but like all primary sources, while it appears objective on the surface, it needs to be treated with caution.

Mysterious events began in a low-key way in the autumn of 1860, with the servant reporting that she could hear strange knocking sounds on her bedstead at night. Superstitiously she thought that this presaged the death of someone in the house, but Joller rebuked her and the incident was forgotten. Some time later, Karoline and Melanie, who had been sharing his bedroom while he was away from home, had a similar experience with the bedside table. Joller was sceptical but puzzled, not being able to work out a natural cause for the event. They now wondered, like the servant, whether this heralded a death, and a letter came a few days later telling them of the death of a friend. Joller thought that this was the end of it.

Several months later, however, things took an ominous turn. In June 1861, Joller's son Oskar did not appear for supper and was found in a faint in a lumber-room. He explained that he had heard knocking sounds and when he had gone to investigate, the door had opened and he had seen a white formless shape. Rationalist Joller ascribed this to Oskar's imagination. Yet

the other children also heard noises, and saw things as well; Henrika said she had seen the apparition of a small child, the servant said she had seen grey shapes. Joller's perhaps exasperated reaction was to dismiss the servant, and hire a 13-year old replacement, in October 1861 (an act which perhaps also saved money).

Things really got going on 15 August 1862. On that day, Joller, Karoline and son Robert went to Lucerne early in the morning while the rest of the family and the servant remained behind. During the morning, Melanie was alone with the servant when she mentioned that Henrika often heard a knocking sound on the wall in one corridor, so the two went to look. Henrika turned up as they were doing so and confirmed it, but Melanie sceptically ordered, "in God's name, if something is there, let it come and knock". On cue there was a rapping noise.

Then Oskar came in, and hearing what had happened, repeated the demand, and the raps answered. Their older brother Eduard heard what was happening so he did the same, once more obtaining a rapping response. The group ran out of the house and while they were sitting on the steps outside, a large pebble fell between Melanie and the youngest boy Alfred. Feeling hungry, they ventured back inside to find the downstairs cupboard doors wide open. Then they found Joller's study door open so they closed it, but when they were not looking it opened again.

They shut the windows in case a draft was causing the door to open but as soon as they stopped looking at it, the door opened again. The same thing happened with a bedroom door, as if something were waiting for them not to be looking, in order to play a game. They heard muffled footsteps apparently coming down the stairs. By this stage the children were rattled, and left the house. The servant ventured back into the kitchen to make lunch and said that she had looked into the corridor and seen a shape somewhat like a sheet hung up by one corner, with what looked like feet. When she called to it the figure disappeared with a strange sound, at which she lost her nerve and ran back to the others.

They stayed outside the house for the rest of the afternoon, at one point seeing various windows and doors spring open. Through one they heard deep voice groan: "Even if no-one is around!" Peering through a window, Eduard and the servant saw a chair slide and turn upside down. They saw formless shapes in Joller's room. The form of a perfect death's head the size of a small coin was seen on the floor, but it faded. This mark was witnessed by the wife of Joller's tenant. Music was heard coming from upstairs.

In the early evening a light was seen in the chimney. When the servant looked up to see what it was, she could see an object shaped like a loaf giving off numerous blue flames. It disintegrated inside the chimney, dousing the fire with water. By the time Karoline returned at 8.30, the children were in a state of nervous collapse. Unfortunately Joller only found out about all this afterwards. As a typical nineteenth-century father suspecting naughtiness, he rebuked the children when they began to tell him their tale, threatening them with

punishment. Later he heard that a relative in Germany had suffered similar mysterious knocking on the same day, though not to the same degree. He took notice when he heard raps himself, and found that attempts at replication led to a different quality of sound. On 19 August he thoroughly searched the ground floor, convinced that he was being tricked, but significantly he took, in addition to a candle, a knife, suggesting that part of him already thought that there was something here beyond members of the household playing the fool. At this point he began to maintain a diary.

Phenomena escalated, according to Joller's account eventually overcoming even his will to disbelieve, despite his initial stubbornness and determination to dismiss reports as nonsense (reading aloud a chapter on 'The Power of Superstition' was found to have no palliative effect). The range was quite incredible and was typical of poltergeist accounts. There were knockings which were responsive to questions. There were scratching sounds that Joller initially attributed to vermin, cats or a bird in the roof. Pictures and mirrors were removed from walls and objects were displaced. Furniture was found disordered in rooms that had been locked.

There was stone throwing at the children, none of whom was injured, as well as the rather more sedate throwing of fruit. A 2lb stone fell down the chimney and bounced off a clay pot and into the kitchen without doing any damage or leaving sooty marks. Glass and earthenware rang as if struck by a metal instrument. There were mystery breezes and footsteps, including sounds as of people dancing in their socks. Items were shoved into a stove though the room was locked.

Among the auditory phenomena were groaning sounds, a deep voice speaking intelligible words, including (incorrectly as it turned out) "I shall come no more" in the Nidwalden patois (the editor of a newspaper reporting this added, "The ghost appears also to be a native"), mysterious music and singing. The first servant reported hearing her name called from the stairs outside her room several times, then the sound of someone sobbing. Another time she heard a voice say "pity me" three times.

Household members heard realistic natural sounds, such as water running, sweeping noises and the whirring of a spindle in a spinning wheel, which had no source within the house. On one occasion Joller had to visit Lucerne to pay a sum of money at his bank, and during his absence his family heard the chinking of coins at the same time he was making his transaction. On another he was out discussing a timber contract on the estate, and his family heard the sounds of wood being chopped and split in the cellar.

There were also figures, or shapes of various colours suggestive of figures. Henrika saw a young semi-clothed boy she initially took to be her younger brother, until he disappeared. Disembodied brown bony arms and partial human forms were seen by members of the household. The tenant's wife thought she saw the servant, "but much better dressed"; Melanie thought she saw the same figure and believed it was the servant, and one of the boys

and the servant herself saw it too. Emaline thought she saw the servant leaning out of a window and picking grapes from the trellis, but the figure disappeared into the leaves, while the servant appeared from the cellar. Joller felt a small hand in bed, but when he opened his eyes nobody was there. Karoline had a similar experience the same night, and there were occasional sensations of being touched by something that felt like the claws of a dog. Dogs feature a number of times in Joller's account, with sounds of scratching like those a dog makes, sounds of movement that seemed like a dog, and a sound of gnawing reminiscent of a dog with a bone.



A younger Melchior Joller

Given that Joller had lived in the house his entire life, he knew that there had been no phenomena in that time, and he established that nothing had happened there earlier. A search of a book on experimental physics in his library left him none the wiser as to the cause. Learned friends who witnessed the disturbances suggested such possibilities as Vulcanism, magnetism, electricity, even an electrical machine, though not how such mechanisms might operate undetected. What may have influenced Joller's change of mind from scepticism to belief, apart from the implausibility of these suggestions, was the reception of many letters from people who had heard of his plight and reported similar, though less intense, occurrences happening to them.

The knockings got worse and eventually attracted the attention of the neighbourhood, so clearly the noise was very loud, yet it does not seem to have done any significant damage to the house, though Joller was concerned that it would. Now thoroughly alarmed, he asked a priest to visit but he could not help. Then Joller asked a councillor who was an old friend, but he could offer no suggestions either. Joller approached other worthies with the same result. He then went to the police, who witnessed what was happening.

As a result of the mayhem, the Town Council authorised an official three-man investigation but this only lasted five days, and Joller complained that they were not interested in getting to the bottom of the mystery and did not prosecute their task with any zeal. The family was obliged to leave while the commission investigated and the phenomena promptly stopped, resuming upon its return. This must have given rise to suspicions that the family, or certain members of it, was responsible.

Word spread even further than the neighbourhood and started to circulate in newspapers. Joller found himself vilified, services to the community forgotten, his desperate situation used as a pretext for point-scoring by opponents. He eventually had to rent alternative accommodation for some of the children as the pressure both within the house and without it mounted, but even this did not afford complete relief as stones pelted them, though again not causing injury.

Naturally the strain told on Joller, trying to deal with the chaos while maintaining his professional obligations. The house now a circus, public interest intensified and the crowds grew. A police presence was required to hold them back, despite which a mob managed to break into the premises. Joller became an object of ridicule as public opinion considered it all a hoax, despite the large numbers who entered the house and witnessed knockings.

Eventually Joller, probably seeing no end in sight, decided that enough was enough and on 23 October 1862 he and his family moved to Zürich where they lived in rented accommodation. While at Zürich, the pamphlet based on his diary was published by Hanke Verlag. In it he expresses his regret in his account at leaving the house, and the wrench of being forced from the place in which he had always lived cannot be underestimated. The phenomena ceased on their departure and the house was finally relet in the spring of 1863. It was eventually sold to the Lussi family (whose coat of arms can be seen on the doors in Anding's film).

Life in Zürich appears to have been difficult, and Joller and Robert appeared in court several times on fraud charges. They had left considerable debts in Stans and, perhaps to escape their problems, the family moved to Rome in September 1865. Joller died there two months later. He was only 47, though in a photograph taken with his family he looks much older. Fanny Moser contacted a number of Joller's descendents in the 1930s, and the nonagenarian Emaline, interviewed by Emilio Servadio in 1938, said that the phenomena had not reoccurred in their later homes.

II

Alan Gauld in his and A D Cornell's *Poltergeists* (1979) refers to the case “being relatively little-known to English readers.” That was not always so, at least among the Spiritualist community. William Howitt took a particular interest in it at the time, providing valuable translations from the German. He produced a digest of extracts from Swiss newspapers, ‘Manifestations at Lucerne’, in *The Spiritual Magazine*, Volume 3, Number 11, November 1862, pp.499-506. This includes extracts from the *Lucerne Tagblatt* (which is incredulous that such things should occur “in the year of railways and telegraphs, 1862”), and a letter from a correspondent who had visited the house, and had supplied the newspaper clippings to Howitt.

This gentleman says that Joller had “a peculiar dreamy look about his eyes”, which could as easily have been caused by stress as the spiritual quality that is presumably being suggested – Joller’s hair supposedly turned white overnight in Zürich. The letter supplies the information that Joller’s grandfather built the house (in fact it was his grandmother, his grandfather having died some time previously) and that Melchior co-owned it with a sister or sisters. Joller had four sisters, but no brothers, and no more seems to have been heard about his siblings and how their interests were affected by the affair. Other newspaper articles are included by Howitt, and one mentions the asphalt roof which was seen by some as a possible factor for the events as it might somehow conduct electricity (this covered an extension Joller had had constructed in 1850).

Howitt later produced a lengthy summary of Joller’s book entitled, ‘Persecution and Expulsion from his Patrimonial House of M. Joller, Late Member of the Swiss National Council, by Disorderly Spirits’, in *The Spiritual Magazine*, Volume 5, Number 2, February 1864, pp.49-62. He concluded that it was remarkable that Joller, the police and the clergy all failed to understand that they could have moved on by prayer unhappy spirits who were only seeking aid from someone in Joller’s house who possessed mediumistic abilities, instead of Joller’s family being forced to leave. All the spirits wanted to do was communicate and be given assistance, and when frustrated because the mediums in the house were untutored, showed their negative side. While sympathetic to Joller’s plight, Howitt considered it a result of his ignorance, and a warning to others. Emma Hardinge Britten included extracts from Howitt’s version, which she considered “the best and most impartial summary”, in *Nineteenth Century Miracles* (1883, pp.384 – 389) in the chapter on ‘Spiritualism in Switzerland’. She added that details of the case had circulated widely in Continental journals in various languages in 1862-3.

While the children were sitting outside on 15 August, too scared to enter the house, an old woman wandered past and spoke to them about drowned girls. The story is included in Howitt’s 1864 article, and is a sad tale. The family’s previous house had been burned by the invading French in September 1798, Joller’s grandmother Veronika Gut (1757-1829) having

been patriotically supportive of the Swiss cause. Three years later, a mysterious voice told her to flee with her family as the French had returned. This was untrue as it happened, but Veronika gathered her children and made for Engelberg. For some reason Joller's father and a guide split off for another destination, but the rest of the party continued. At Wolfenschiessen there was a narrow footbridge over the river Aa. Veronika crossed first, her four daughters, the eldest only 19, following her. The footbridge gave way and although Veronika managed to jump to safety, the daughters fell into the river and drowned. This was an enormous blow, the more so as her eldest son had already died fighting the French. It could provide a haunting explanation for the events, though one with a long lead-time, but Joller does not consider the implications of what was clearly a significant family tragedy.

III

Gauld devotes a substantial amount of space in *Poltergeists* to Joller as a case that he considers to be *prima facie* fairly strong, but with points that are amenable to sceptical analysis. After supplying long extracts from Joller's account, he goes on to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the case as evidence for a poltergeist (in Gauld and Cornell's chronological list, Stans is No. 217, on p.381). Firstly, he asks about the status of Joller's diary, as reproduced in the pamphlet. Could it be a fiction? Of the original diary's existence he has no doubt, though the published version could have been elaborated. There is plenty of independent evidence that events occurred in the Joller household during the autumn of 1862. Emaline told Servadio that she remembered her father writing in his diary, and there is no reason to disbelieve her.

The second issue is that of Joller's good faith. Gauld's view is that he was definitely innocent of collusion, considering the diary to depict the situation with at times "almost painful honesty", and citing the financial and political fall-out that he suffered. Thirdly, he may have been honest, but was he a good witness? Gauld concludes he was, because he was an able person who approached events in a calm and methodical manner, attempting to find causes for his experiences, and carefully recording the results. Fourthly, was he deceived? Robert came under suspicion, particularly after he was seen talking to an actor in the street in Lucerne, and so did the servant girl. But things happened when neither was present.

As an aside, the issue of Robert talking to an actor, implying that the events were orchestrated by someone with theatrical experience, is an interesting one because Peter Steiner in his note on Joller in the *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland* says that in 1851-52 Joller was president of the Stans theatre company. Even so, knowledge of acting and possibly stagecraft is a far cry from what would have had to be a complex and extended performance, with none of the mechanisms visible. Also, if Joller mounted a dramatic production, how is it that there were such long gaps between events? One would expect a ratcheting up of tension, whereas months would go by when nothing happened. This does not have the feel of a crafted performance about it.

The argument for hoaxing looks not entirely convincing in Gauld's opinion. On the other hand, he considers whether Stans can be categorised as a haunting or a poltergeist and finds that it does not fit neatly into either category. There were teenage children in the house, often considered to be prime poltergeist foci, and phenomena ceased while the family was elsewhere during the formal investigation, but there seems to have been no *single* focus, and events occurred when the house was apparently empty. At the same time, physical phenomena went beyond what might be considered to constitute a haunting. Even so, Gauld concludes that Stans was far from unique.

IV

This long preamble brings us to the fascinating film made by Volker Anding on the Joller case, called, in English, *Haunted House in Switzerland*. It nails its colours firmly with its first title: "The best documented poltergeist case in history". Anding's quest to understand what happened at Stans began in an antiquarian bookshop in Leipzig where he bought a copy of Moser's *Spuk : Irrglaube oder Wahrglaube?*. Moser's book, published at Baden in 1950 with a foreword by Carl Jung, handily reprinted *Darstellung selbsterlebter mystischer Erscheinungen*, and added supplementary material on the Joller family. Intrigued, Anding visits Stans, and his persona through the film is that of the interested outsider trying to get to the bottom of the mystery with the help of experts. An immediate coincidence is finding himself in an hotel with a shoe shop on the opposite side of the street called 'Joller'. He wonders if this is significant, but of course there could be distant relatives still in the town.

A friend in Lucerne helping with research had contacted the local Capuchin monastery which supposedly holds a copy of Joller's pamphlet, so Anding visits. There is a library card, but their copy is missing. The librarian is philosophical – "Habent sua fata libelli" – "Books have their own fate". Anding meets local Stans residents and they tell him that the house is to be torn down shortly. Managing to persuade the owners to postpone demolition, he takes a camera crew to investigate, and their stay in the house forms the bulk of the film. They are given six days to shoot, and the film is a valuable document showing the inside of the building, though one that has been extensively altered since the 1860s.

Anding asks himself how you make a film about a haunted house. He suggests that you could use computer-generated imagery, but dismisses that as more appropriate for feature films. He resolves to do without tricks, even though actually the film is sprinkled with them. The difficulty in trying to make a documentary about a historical poltergeist is indicated by an incident in which the door is shown opening by itself, as part of the script, i.e. it is manipulated by the crew, but then suddenly it closes, an action *not* in the script. Anding asks himself where trickery ends and reality, either normal or paranormal, begins – a theme of the film.

They install microphones and three infrared cameras in order to monitor the house, so the film is part historical documentary, part spontaneous case investigation. Titles denote the start of each day, a trope from haunted house films and an easy way to generate tension. Anding treats the place as a “crime scene”, though as much a ‘whatdunit’ as a ‘whodunit’. He invites five experts to visit, and interviews are interspersed with readings from the diary, a copy of which surprisingly the crew finds on the premises.



The Joller Family (minus Robert)

The first expert is Werner Husmann, a building engineer who has studied the case for some years. His theory is that Joller was deep in debt and creditors were after his assets (we know that the collapse of *Nidwaldner Wochenblatt* in 1857 left Joller with considerable losses, so this is a reasonable assumption). Faced with financial ruin and the loss of his social position and political career, Joller in desperation set up the poltergeist effects in collaboration with a secret lodger in an effort to devalue the house and prevent it being taken over. Unfortunately he lost control of the situation as word spread, so his plan backfired.

To support his contention that Joller orchestrated the phenomena, Husmann thinks it suggestive that the extension housing the tenant and his wife and three children was undisturbed. A poltergeist would not have been selective, he considers, though this assumes

some inside knowledge of poltergeist behaviour. The apparitions and shapes would have been the intruder's head disguised with cloths, moving quietly into position and then making a lot of noise to scare the children away. He demonstrates how an intruder could creep around undetected by removing a wooden panel in the toilet, which would have allowed access from the tenants' extension into the main house.

Watching Husmann's imitation of a hoaxer, it seems implausible that this could occur for so long in a house of ten people without other members of the family realising that the noises were faked, or bumping into the secret sharer by accident. On the other hand it might account for some of the shapes seen in the gloom. The main problem with the theory is that Joller would have tormented his own family, as Anding points out, and however frantic with worry over his finances, this seems an extreme act. There is also the obvious problem that he risked obtaining a lower price when he did have to relinquish the property, but it would account for Joller's subsequent poverty, even after the sale. One wonders though why these mysterious creditors did not speak up at the time about Joller's finances in an effort to prevent a decrease in the house's value. Anding certainly isn't convinced by Husmann's argument as he thinks that it multiplies the mystery.

Whether it is the house itself, or expectation on the part of the film crew, who are all sharing a sleeping space, the strain starts to tell. One member reports a strange occurrence, going out briefly early in the morning and finding the door locked on his return. Nobody else admits to having locked it. Another night two raps at 3.29am wake Anding, and when they check the overnight footage, at 3.29, they see that a door shuts on its own. Something paranormal, or just a draught?

They also start to note coincidences. Anding had already seen a shop with Joller's name, now they notice six-pointed stars in Joller's coat of arms, in a stained glass window with the family name, and all over the house. They then find stars in the chocolate spread (not something you find in German chocolate spread) and inside a plastic bottle cap. Are these some kind of message, or are the filmmakers just primed to notice stars more? Similar ambiguity surrounds the visit of a dog to see if it can sense anything. It seems to be anxious in the hall, but, but Anding wonders if that is possibly because the floor is too smooth for it to walk on comfortably.

The next expert is parapsychologist Walter von Lucadou from Freiburg, who also considers the Joller case to be the best-documented poltergeist in history. He dismisses the contention that it was all staged, and thinks Husmann's approach to be unscientific as he switches arguments when each is proved to be inadequate. What, Lucadou asks, did Joller have to gain by a hoax? Joller suffered immensely from it as well as his family, and gained nothing. In any case, it was not necessary, Lucadou continues. If he had wanted to save face in his embarrassing situation he could have used his political enemies as a pretext, saying that he no longer wished to be part of the situation, and simply left, which would in fact have enhanced his reputation (but would his financial situation, if indeed it was parlous, have come out

then?). The use of the poltergeist as a device is nonsense, Lucadou thinks, because Joller must have known that ridicule would be the result. One has to agree that it does seem a more sensible strategy in a financial crisis simply to liquidate one's assets quietly than to pretend to have a poltergeist.

Rather than making the data fit a preconceived idea, as he thinks Husmann does, Lucadou by contrast looks for a pattern in the chaos, though he pays tribute to Husmann's research. He feels that the diary paints too rosy a picture of the family, when it was actually in a precarious position that Joller could not discuss with them. This would have been stressful for Joller, Lucadou believes, so there was a psychological cause behind the phenomena. Lucadou mentions a door buckling with nobody standing behind it as an example of something that could not have been faked. The solid doors shown in the film are later ones, and it is difficult to know how substantial the original ones were. Joller describes the door in question as being of a soft pinewood, and the fact that the doors were replaced suggests they were flimsy; even so it is hard to see how someone could have used force enough to damage a door without being spotted, unless there was a conspiracy in operation. Lucadou considers it possible that family members were a poltergeist focus, especially with adolescents present. It could therefore be a genuinely paranormal situation, of which there are often similar cases today. Joller's mistake, he thinks, was telling people about it, as publicity is always damaging.



Das Spukhaus

The third expert is Capuchin monk Dietrich Wiederkehr, formerly a professor of theology at Lucerne. He is struck reading Joller's book that Joller positioned himself as rational and opposed to superstition, but he felt under attack and harassed by visitors as if he were the

superstitious one. Wiederkehr feels that the phenomena were caused by earthbound spirits, the dead for whom the living were praying making themselves perceptible. They needed intercession, and for this they were trying to attract attention, using objects connected to the dead in some way (an analysis similar to Howitt's). He refers to a belief that Veronika, Joller's deceased grandmother was behind it. According to this theory, she was a militant nationalist, and as Joller was a liberal there was a political clash, and her hope was to bring her progressive grandson back to the right path. How she hoped to do that is unclear, and this would have been an excessive and odd way to bring Melchior to her way of thinking, taking it to such a pitch that they left her house.

Anding visits Hansjakob Achermann, director of the National Archives in Stans, to ask if the commission's report is still there. It transpires that there is only a short summary in the weekly Council's minutes, based on a verbal communication, with no formal written report attached. Achermann suspects that they did not even stay in the house, but merely stationed a policeman there, and they did not question any witnesses. All this he does not think surprising as it was typical for the times. As he puts it, why would they interview witnesses if they did not believe Joller? Joller it seems was right to be sceptical about the willingness of the authorities to get to the bottom of the situation; or perhaps they knew more than they were saying.

The next expert is Christoph Borer, a magician, who starts with a trick, showing someone seeming to fall from an upper window, to illustrate how we can be deceived. He thinks that the phenomena could have been faked; admittedly it would have been more difficult for the amateur, but still possible: "It's not a big deal to make a stone appear". He certainly believes that the house would be amenable to carrying out tricks. A room in which furniture was upturned had two doors into separate rooms, allowing Joller to leave by one door, and giving someone a minute to come in by the other and turn the furniture over before the family re-entered. A couple of people could simulate several more, to make the odd sounds that were likened to a crowd dancing in their socks. He is most impressed by the stories of stones raining down but not injuring people, and cannot account for how it was done (somewhat contradicting his earlier statement; it seems it is a big deal after all).

He definitely thinks that if it were a hoax it would have been ingenious. Setting it up and carrying it out undetected by other people in the house would have been a remarkable achievement, in fact the magic event of the century, taking a huge amount of planning, perhaps a year and an enormous budget. You would have to know the house well (but then Joller said, in his defence, that he had seen the house being repaired since he was a small boy and had taken an interest, therefore knew the construction intimately).

Borer concludes that it wasn't staged after all because it would have been too massive and expensive an undertaking, and the result would not have justified the effort. While superficially plausible, Borer looks at it like a sophisticated stage show with specialist planning, but the thing could have been much more ad hoc, as Husmann argues. In fact, it is

a shame that the experts were not brought together in a roundtable discussion to argue their cases with each other.

The final expert is Beatrice Rübli, a medium. She does not believe that Joller produced the phenomena deliberately but thinks that they were caused by spirits, possibly Veronika, making their presence known in a dramatic way. A spirit drawing of Veronika is made to Rübli's instructions. No image of the old lady was known to exist, but Rübli hopes that one might come to light one day.

During the course of the crew's occupation of the house, Brigitt Flüeler, an editor from Zürich, tells Anding that her father had previously been in contact with Joller's great grandchildren in Rome. Nicolao Joller, Alfred's grandson, had apparently shown her father files from the family archives and mentioned a secret manuscript by Melchior which detailed why the events had taken place. It had written on the cover in Roman dialect: "For the family only". Nicolao always promised to show it to Flüeler's father but somehow never managed it.

Anding asks some of his experts what they think might be in the mystery manuscript. Lucadou speculates that it might reveal Joller's realisation that events were connected to his family, which could have been a shocking experience for him. Or possibly Joller adopted a conventional Spiritualistic interpretation that the events were caused by spirits, a switch which would have conflicted with his scientific worldview. Beatrice Rübli thinks that the secret manuscript might have some insights into a spiritual connection to the events. There does not seem to be much expectation by anyone that it is Joller's confession to fakery, singly or jointly.

So Anding goes off to Rome to see Riccardo Joller, Melchior's great-grandson, and hopefully the secret manuscript. The initial encounter is a bit strange: Riccardo has a gramophone playing the old Swiss National Anthem, which happens to be the same tune as *God Save the Queen*. It turns out that the archives are not there, but are kept by his sister Maria-Pia in the centre of Rome. The next day they go to Maria-Pia's house bearing a gift of a beautiful photograph album of the house. Riccardo looks at the spirit drawing of Veronika, and says that he thinks that she was behind the haunting. In the hallway is her painting, looking not unlike the drawing, though the medium's description was expressed in terms that might apply to many elderly early-nineteenth century women.

Maria-Pia says that she has the secret manuscript, having inherited it from her brother Nicolao. The cover does say "Exclusive family property", and Ricardo says he needs to organise their archives before filming is allowed there. That will take two months; Anding unsurprisingly smells a rat. After that, despite regular contact, no sight of the secret document has been forthcoming, nor any indication of what it contains. There must be more in it than can be found in the published version of the diary, else why the evasiveness? Or perhaps the family wants to maintain an empty secret in order to retain a sense of importance.

The rush by Anding to investigate the house in 2003 seems to have been somewhat premature as the film has a title signalling an epilogue, saying “7 years later”, showing rather distressing footage of the lovely old house being demolished, with further titles: “Built in 1798” and “torn down in February 2010”. But Anding has one more piece of trickery up his sleeve. Following the title “you can tear down a house...”, we see reverse footage of the house being put back together and the final title: “... but you cannot tear down a myth.” Indeed. As Anding’s film provides documentary material on a house no longer in existence, and brings together the views of a number of experts, its value cannot be underestimated.



The end in sight

V

The case raises a number of thoughts. The most obvious explanation is that it was a hoax by a member or members of the household. For such a verdict to be plausible, it has to be assumed that Joller was either a poor witness, or complicit. He comes across as the archetypal sceptic who refuses to acknowledge that the phenomena have a paranormal origin, despite mounting evidence that they could not be anything else, until left with no answers – the children at one point, with heavy blows hammering on the living room floor, ask father rather sarcastically if he still thinks it is a rat.

Well no, but he did, if his account is to be believed, think for a long time that it was someone tricking him, which was the parsimonious verdict until the volume of events proved that view

if not untenable then implausible. It was a large family in a big house, with opportunities for hoaxing (or misperception in some instances), but it is difficult to see how Joller could have been fooled by raps on either side of a door which he happened to be holding it in his hands. There was scope for fakery or lying by some of the family on occasion though; if against an innocent Joller perhaps because he was too strict, and this was a chance to get revenge.

Given the number of occupants, for a hoax to remain uncovered would suggest a conspiracy, and Joller himself said that a hoax would have to involve at least four or five people. It is hard to conceive how it could have been managed without the perpetrators being caught, or that Joller would not have taken pains to ensure that he was not being fooled by the children, the most obvious explanation in his position. There are numerous instances of something seen through a window, making it harder to carry out a deception unobserved. Eventually nobody wanted to be alone in a room, even during the day, which would have limited the scope for hoaxing still further, though arguably not if there were a conspiracy.

Perhaps, though, Joller was not as innocent as his book makes him out to be. Joller, Karoline and Robert were absent during the manifestations on 15 August, but it is possible that they only pretended to go to Lucerne and were actually hiding in and around the house; all three would have had to have been in on the trick, if that is what it was. Even so, events on that day only began when Melanie happened to mention that Henrika had often heard raps, guiding the young servant girl to where they were supposed to occur. She may thus have been party to a deception, by making sure that the other children were in a spot where the three adults could make the rapping responses. The incident with the stone later in the day, when she and Alfred were sitting on the step, would be easy to fake as young Alfred (who was only 3, hardly a reliable witness) could have been easily convinced that a stone had fallen from higher up when she had held it up behind him and dropped it between them. It was also Melanie who was sharing a bedroom with her mother when they reported knockings coming from the bedside table. However, while the girls might be considered suspects for some of the events, the mystery voice heard on occasion was male, which rules them out as sole hoaxers, and focuses attention on Joller and Robert.

On one occasion when events were occurring at home, Joller was in court at Lucerne, so presumably with a solid alibi, and thus could not have been responsible for a hoax on his own. Emaline told Servadio that one night her father had had a mysterious experience after which he said, "Now I understand!" Unfortunately he did not say what it was he understood, but the statement, if true, does seem to weaken a charge of hoaxing against him slightly, suggesting as it does that he suddenly had an insight into forces outside himself, whether paranormal or not. Yet while Lewis Spence in his *An Encyclopædia of Occultism*, 1920, p.326, refers to Joller as "a man of excellent character", our image of him has mainly come to us through his own words, and we need to be cautious about taking these at face value.

It is possible that the events were faked by other hands entirely. For example, Camille Flammarion includes Stans in *Haunted Houses* (1924), in a chapter on 'Haunting phenomena

not attributable to the dead. Rapping spirits. Poltergeist'. He refers to a book published by Professor Maximilian Perty of Berne University in 1863, and gives an extract from it. This cites a Lucerne newspaper called *Der Eidgenoss* which stated that instruments had been found in the house that caused the raps, the object being to depreciate the value in order to induce the owner (i.e. Joller) to "sell it for a song". Joller had replied through another newspaper that no cause for the sounds had been found, thereby dismissing the accusation that he was the victim of a plot to purchase the house for a sum far beneath its true worth. This theory seems even less likely than Husmann's 'secret lodger' scenario, which would at least have had the advantage of Joller's complicity.

If he were innocent, one wonders how consoled Joller must in fact have been by Perty's conclusion that he "will find some consolation for the annoyance and disturbance he suffered on account of these mysterious phenomena, in the thought that they contribute to the enlarging of our spiritual horizon, and open a vista of a new order of things..." (Flammarion, pp.282-3). Perty's nonchalant attitude to Joller's misfortune is all the more surprising given that the title of Joller's book alludes to Perty's 1861 *Die mystischen Erscheinungen der Menschlichen Natur* (*The Mystical Nature of Human Phenomena*), and Perty wrote the preface to Joller's book.

There are other possibilities than hoaxing though. Gauld is correct when he says that that the Stans case does not fit neatly into any single category, whether haunting, poltergeist or fakery, but it is also true that it exhibits many of the same phenomena found in other poltergeist cases from diverse places and times. The fact that it was typical made it a good case study for Gauld to begin his and Tony Cornell's book. But while there were factors, such as pubescence, which are associated with poltergeists, the question still arises: what was it about this situation that could lead to such dramatic effects? After all, other households contain similar numbers of young people with hormones swilling around, and never display any poltergeist activity. Something about the house at Stans provided the trigger, which was not a factor for subsequent occupants (assuming that nothing further occurred in the house, rather than later owners keeping quiet in order to prevent more scandal).

In addition to the poltergeist possibility, there were candidates for some kind of haunting, Veronika for political reasons, or her daughters because of their tragedy (there was a similarity in age between Joller's aunts at their deaths and his daughters, which may or may not have been significant). Despite the figures seen, this does not conform to a classic haunting either, and these sightings are more readily attributable to misperception, confabulation, and perhaps mounting hysteria.

The number of people living together house suggests that there might have been something in the interpersonal dynamics, something that changed once the family had left Stans and the children later dispersed to begin independent lives. The issue of sexual exploitation of the girls has to be considered as a possible factor, one that might have generated the energy for a poltergeist, or have been simply an elaborate cry for help in an age when these things could

not be discussed. It is possible that it was a mixture of some of these factors, but at this stage we are unlikely to find a definitive cause, unless Joller's descendents in Rome really are sitting on information that they are unwilling to divulge. The stonewalling implies that if they are, it is not to the credit of one or more members of Melchior's household.

VI

E J Dingwall reviewed Moser's *Spuk : Irrglaube oder Wahrglaube?* in the *Journal* of the Society for Psychical Research the year after it was published (*JSPR*, Vol. 36, 1951, pp.373-5). While acknowledging Moser's industry in supplementing Joller's record, he is dismissive of its value from a practical perspective as it does nothing to explain what happened at Stans, and he refers to "sources which are often suspect in themselves", with their issues of fraud and misperception (speaking generally rather than about Stans specifically). Edmond Offenstadt, in a review of the same book in *Revue Métapsychique* (No. 15 New Series, July-September 1951, pp.149-51), says that the investigating commission was made up of Joller's political opponents and was designed to cast suspicion on him, a thesis borne out by its inactivity.



Schreckliche Gesellschaft, by Lukas Vogel

Dingwall's copy of *Darstellung selbsterlebter mystischer Erscheinungen* is in the British Library, the Society for Psychical Research has a copy in its collection at Cambridge University Library. A new edition, edited by Brigitt Flüeler, was published by b. edition in 2007, ISBN 978-3-033-00961-5. That the Joller case will continue to fascinate is suggested by a recent book called *Schreckliche Gesellschaft: Das Spukhaus zu Stand und das Leben von Melchior Joller* (*Terrible Company: the Haunted House at Stans and the Life of Melchior Joller*) by Lukas Vogel, published by Hier Und Jetzt Verlag in 2011, ISBN-13: 978-3039192373.

Vogel is the former head of the Office for Culture in Nidwalden and found new information during his researches in Lucerne, Freiburg and Rome. This includes the revelation that documents produced by the commission have survived, such as witness testimonies and the chairman's notebook. These confirm that there was not a thorough enquiry, only an effort to find evidence of fraud by members of the household, and when it was not forthcoming, the commission ceased its work. Given this new research, it is to be hoped that Vogel's book will find a publisher for an English-language edition. Sadly, though, even he did not manage to peek in that elusive secret manuscript so zealously guarded (perhaps) by the present family Joller.

I would like to thank Lukas Vogel for his comments on the original version of this review.